

The Need to Revise Handwriting Systematically

By Roger Barnard

It is necessary for teachers to be systematic, not merely in the introduction of the alphabet to young learners, but also in its revision. This need is discussed in the article *Handwriting: The Neglected Skill* by Mahamad M. Ajineh in the April 1996 edition of *English Teaching Forum*.

It is not easy for school-age learners to acquire good handwriting habits when their own language uses a different alphabet. In many state school systems, typically those in the Middle East, children may be taught in classes of thirty or more, with only four or five 30-minute English lessons a week. The school year is often short-perhaps only twenty to twenty-six weeks. This is very little time for the young learners to familiarize themselves with new letter shapes and with a different direction of hand, eye, and pen movements, not to mention the vagaries of our alphabet (It really is rather difficult for young Arabic-speaking children to comprehend when-and when not-to use capital letters in English.). Added to the difficulty is the fact that the length of summer vacations means that at the start of every new school year, many learners will not have used English at all for three months or more-plenty of time for them to have forgotten the good habits encouraged by their teachers. Compounding the problem is the tendency in many countries to introduce the teaching of English earlier and earlier in the school curriculum, so that the youngest learners are attempting to become literate in a second language at a time when they are barely so in their own.

The following suggestion is not intended to be a panacea: Indeed, there is none. The proposal may, however, be of some help to teachers who are wondering how to deal with the handwriting of their classes at the start of their second (or third, or fourth) year of English. It is a way to systematically check, revise and improve learners' handwriting through the use of dictations. Dictations are a tried and trusty friend of many teachers-not least because they are easy to prepare and also enable the teacher to control the students' language and behaviour very closely in a lesson; this is particularly important when, for example, at the start of a year, the teacher is in front of an unfamiliar (and often large) class. The proposal has the additional advantage that it does not require the use of textbooks, which in many places arrive in schools well after the official start of the school year. There are seven basic steps.

1. The first step is for the teachers to consider, and make a note of, a list of likely areas of weakness:

- wrong point of entry-too low, too high-(with a note of particular letters which might cause problems such as *o* or *e*)
- wrong pen direction (e.g., *z*, *y*, *x*)
- ascenders not high enough (e.g., *t*, *d*, *b*, *h*, *k*)
- descenders do not extend below the line (e.g., *g*, *j*, *y*)
- words are not consistently written along the line
- letters are incorrectly joined to each other

- capital letters are wrongly formed (e.g., they fall below the line)
- capital letters are wrongly used (e.g., they occur in the middle of words)
- words are irregularly spaced
- basic punctuation is wrongly formed (e.g., apostrophes on the line)

2. The next step is to write a short dictation passage suitable for the level of the class. This might, of course, be an adaptation of a text that the learners had worked on towards the end of the previous year. This would ensure that the vocabulary and structures are-or should be-within their competence. This passage should be dictated to the class in one of the first lessons of the year.

3. The resulting scripts should be collected and analysed by the teacher in order to identify the most common or the most important errors. To do this, the teacher could produce a scattergram by first listing all the basic errors and then checking every occurrence of the specified errors on the list. So, for example, you might-with a class of 30 or 40 learners-produce a scattergram like the one below-where every x indicates a systematic (see Footnote 1 below) error of the specific type written by the pupils in their scripts:

| | | |
|---------------------|----------|-------------------------|
| 1.entry point: | e | xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx |
| | o | xxxxx |
| 2.pen direction: | p | xxxxxxxxxx |
| | n | xxxxxxxxxxxxx |
| 3.ascenders | | xxxxx |
| 4.descenders | | xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx |
| 5.use of line | | xxxxxxx |
| 6.joining | | xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx |
| 7.capitals - form | | xxxxxx |
| 8.capitals - use | | xxxxxxxxxx |
| 9.irregular spacing | | xxxxxxxxxxxxx |
| 10.punctuation | | xxxxxxx |

For any set of dictations done by a class, there may be crosses against several items, and-in very good classes-no crosses at all against one or two items. In the above example, the teacher may come to the conclusion that numbers 3, 5, and 7 were all done sufficiently well by most of the class, but that the others needed focused attention in class because a significant number of students had shown systematic weaknesses in these areas. The teacher needs to decide the order in which the various items should be revised.

4. The next step is to write a short dictation passage, including a number of words containing the particular handwriting error. In the above case, the teacher might decide to focus on errors in descenders, which seemed to be fairly general, so the dictation passage would contain a high proportion of words containing letters such as *f*, *p*, and *y*. It is, of course, necessary to choose these words from the known lexicon of the learners.

5. At the start of the next lesson, the teacher would spend some time revising the graphic features of the handwriting item in focus. As much detail as possible should be elicited from the class about the sort of issues that Mr. Ajineh referred to in his article, i.e., the entry point of the letters, the movement of the hand and direction of the pen, which parts of the letters fall below the line, the exit point, etc. The teacher should clearly show the pupils how to write the letters properly, using a four-line stave on the board, reminding them of the basic hand movements as he writes: "up, down, round," etc. This should be followed by some controlled practice such as the following:

- discriminating between those letters which have descenders and those which do not,
- using flashcards,
- demonstrating on the black/whiteboard,
- copying letters and words from the board into exercise books.

In large classes, it is very difficult for the teacher to check individual pupils while they are writing. This on- task monitoring is very important as it is easy for young learners to get used to forming the letters incorrectly-and such habits are difficult to eradicate. It is useful, therefore, for learners in large classes to do such copying in pairs: One learner writes, while the other monitors to give feedback as to whether or not the writer is moving his/her hand in the correct way. The teacher can then focus on smaller groups or individuals with particular needs.

6. The teacher should give the prepared dictation and collect the work.

7. The scripts should then be analysed to see the extent to which the class has improved (or has not!) the weakness in focus. If the weakness has not significantly improved, the teacher should prepare another dictation to focus on the same item, and give more (but different) remedial teaching and practice on the specific point before doing the dictation. If the weakness has improved, the teacher should prepare another dictation passage, this time focusing on another important general weakness. Elements of the previous item in focus should, however, be incorporated. Then steps 4 through 7 should be followed again.

Conclusion

By following the above procedure, teachers may attempt to systematically check, revise, and improve their learners' handwriting. Some classes will enjoy seeing the scattergrams put up on a classroom wall, and their improvement noted by a progressive reduction in the number of errors made by the class as a whole. Scattergrams will also give the class a clear indication of the importance the teacher attaches to accuracy and clarity in handwriting.

Roger Barnard is a lecturer at the University of Waikato in New Zealand. He has also worked for the British Council and Ministries of Education in Europe and the Middle East.

Footnote 1

*The term systematic means that the error occurs more than once or twice in the passage and cannot therefore be regarded as a "slip of the pen."